



## Dewey, or Don't We?

by Traci Vogel

School librarians debate how digital to go, and whether to keep advocating for the endangered book.

When Thomas Washington began his training as a school librarian, he assumed that one thing united the profession: an attraction to books.

But, as Washington wrote in a recent *Washington Post* editorial, "as I moved along in my library science program, I found that books weren't really our focus. Information management, database networking, and research tools claimed the largest share of the curriculum."

"Literacy today," Washington continued, "is defined less by how English departments or a librarian might teach Wordsworth or Faulkner than by how we find our way through the digital forest of information overload."

Washington is hardly alone in his lament. Today's school librarians find themselves caught in an ideological conundrum. On the one side is the knowledge that attention spans have plummeted among young people, as has reading, and the culprits seem to be video games and the Internet. On the other side, the Internet and digital media are touted as the salvation for an otherwise obsolete, increasingly irrelevant system of public schooling.

Writing on the blog *Free Range Librarian*, Karen Schneider divides the profession into "those who see the new information age as a threat to old ways" and those who consider it "a great opportunity — one that might liberate us from our role as curators of dead-tree collections and move us toward the more dynamic, vital, and timeless role of cultural leaders."

This adjustment to changing technology in the library mirrors the education community's broader struggle, in which attempts to get kids' attention via video games or popular Web sites such as MySpace — and to generally shape teaching to better reach the tech-centric minds of kids today — clash with worries that important, "old-fashioned" skills are being allowed to wither.

In his *Washington Post* editorial, Thomas Washington references a 2004 report by the National Endowment for the Arts called "Reading at Risk," which found that reading had decreased among young adults ages eighteen to twenty-four at a rate 55 percent higher than that of the total adult population. At roughly the same time, however, Internet content created by teens was rapidly increasing: A November 2005 study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that 57 percent of teens who use the Internet have created a blog, a Web page, or other media content.

The majority of librarians, of course, don't represent the extremes of Luddite versus techie, "book lover" versus "dead-tree opponent."

"School librarians are aware of the issues but aren't taking sides," says Pamela P. Barron, an associate professor in the Department of Library and Information Studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro's School of Education. "They are trying to resolve it the best way they can. They're trying to meet the information needs of the kids and teachers in their care. School-media specialists will use any technology available to do that."

Such technology includes Second Life, the online virtual world in which users can interact through avatars, and that houses its own "Information Island," with on-site libraries. User-created sites such as blogs, social-networking sites like MySpace, mobile phones, wikis, podcasts, videocasts, RSS feeds, and social bookmarking tools are also employed.

The list is growing. Each of these technologies, however, has one thing in common: They all increase the amount of information students, teachers, and librarians have to wade through. The number of blogs alone doubles about every six months; as of December 2006, the Internet search engine Technorati indexed fifty-five million of them.

It's the "digital forest of information overload," as Thomas Washington calls it. But Barron argues that the librarian's role as forest ranger has, in essence, never changed. The forest may have shifted, but the librarian's role is the same: He or she is "the interface between the information and the user," she adds. "Our whole history has been that; that's been a traditional role of libraries."

As is usually the case in swirling ideological battles, librarians on the ground simply plow ahead. And they do so effectively, according to a new study by Rutgers University's Center for International Scholarship in School Libraries. The study showed that 99.4 percent of students in grades 3–12 believe school libraries and their services help them become better learners, and 92.4 percent said computers in the media center helped improve their overall academic work.

And "kids today can still get really excited about a good book," says Barron. "I get emails from teachers saying even though kids today are bombarded with all this digital media, they still want to read a good story. Even all these movies that are out today are based on good books. And now there's this phenomenon with young adults — graphic novels. There's that new TV series, *Heroes*, which has graphic novels on its Web site. Good librarians tie into those things. They find out what kids are interested in, and they capitalize on that."

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***The following Web sites appeared in this article:***

Washington Post: [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/01/19/AR2007011901361.html?sub=AR](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/01/19/AR2007011901361.html?sub=AR)

Free Range Librarian: [freerangelibrarian.com](http://freerangelibrarian.com)

Second Life: [www.glef.org/1709](http://www.glef.org/1709)

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